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The Enlightenment

Alan Riach

From the moment in 1660 when Thomas Urquhart dies laughing to the publication of Walter Scott's first novel *Waverley* in 1814, Scottish literature becomes increasingly aware of itself. That is, Scottish writers – some of them – become increasingly self-conscious of their own literary ancestors. This is brought about centrally in the work of Allan Ramsay (1684-1758), in his anthologies of earlier poets, and in the edition of Gavin Douglas's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* (1710) published by Thomas Ruddiman (1674-1757), which was probably what Burns was quoting from in the epigraph to "Tam o' Shanter": "Of Brownie and Bogillis full is this Buke."

The evolutionary turn towards greater self-awareness, the process of questioning the formation of national identity, the position of that identity in an ongoing struggle for economic prosperity and international colonial and imperial power, is central in the history of Scotland from around 1660 to 1707. It underlies and suffuses the writing of philosophers, politicians, dramatists, novelists, poets, and travel writers. After the Union of 1707, the flourishing of great poetry in the Gaelic tradition that surrounded the Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745, the poetry linked to the suppression and dispersal of the clans after 1746, and to the later Highland Clearances, the brilliance of vernacular Scots language poetry pre-eminently in Fergusson and Burns, the popularity of radical new departures in English-language poetry like James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1730) or novels like Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771) – all these things fermented in Scotland's intellectual life through the course of the 18th century. Underlying them all were questions about the viability of the identity of Scotland itself: a singular nation voiced in multiple and elaborate formulations.

The foundations of both Enlightenment and Romanticism, in Scotland, are a complex mix of social structures and individually exceptional acts. In English literature, and perhaps in Europe generally, the transition is normally thought of as chronological, linear, from the social satire of snappy, crackling Pope, to the socialist individualism of atheist Shelley, hypersensitive Keats, solitary Wordsworth, intensely imagining Coleridge. Formal, social dance in the grand ballroom gives way to the heaven-bound leap of the individual dancer, soaring above the mob. Patterns observed give way to acts of perception, the violent

individualism of moments or characters described, say, in paintings by Goya, or equally, the urgency of the artist's perception itself. Early Haydn gives way to late Beethoven.

In Scotland, the story is more complex, the two kinds of ethos more closely enmeshed. It is not a simple progression but a range of responses to, developments from, aspects of cultural history that have not always been seen comprehensively. Burns and Scott were both men of the Enlightenment and at the same time, they were both Romantics. Both respected and loved things in their appropriate place and their correct order: in "Now Westlin' Winds" Burns approves the plover in the mountains, the partridge in the fruitful dells; Scott sees justice in balance, mediation, moderation: rarely is he driven to extremes, never easily. Yet both assert the rights of men and women of whatever social station to a democratic justice of human worth. For Burns, Tam o' Shanter's life is as valid as any king's, for Scott, Jeanie Deans's story in *The Heart of Midlothian* is as vital as the aristocrat Amy Robsart's or even Queen Elizabeth's in *Kenilworth*. This carries the seed of a new and different aesthetic for modern Scottish literature: not the epiphany of perception enacted by an isolated consciousness but an epiphany of participation in a changing social continuity. The isolated individual and the organization of society are understood to be not opposed, neither "naturally" nor in historical chronology, but are in continual relation with each other.

So, what is "The Enlightenment"? What is "Romanticism"?

Go back behind them, first. The prehistory of the Enlightenment is also the prehistory of Romanticism, and the prehistory of both is the Reformation. The Reformation is often thought of as a fundamental cultural fault-line, yet the continuities across it are many. The ideal of education as a birthright, not as a privilege of class or financial status, the provision of schools in every parish in Scotland, were to some degree present before as well as after the Reformation. Protestantism may have endorsed universal religious education for every individual but the institutional foundations to enable that were not new.

Yet if the Enlightenment developed out of a fundamental capacity for understanding, socially enhanced by respect for the intrinsic value of education, it also came out of a period of contest and conflict – intellectual, literary, ethical and religious, as well as social, political and military. Both Enlightenment and Romanticism arise in the wake of the Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745, where systems of religious belief and social hierarchy, language, cultural practice, socially approved habits of thought and behaviour, sensitivity to the beliefs and sensibilities of others, were ferociously contested. Both arise from a widening experience of

cultural relativism and the acknowledgement of independent forms of government and social authority. From the same century and the same mix arise the assertions of new forms of self-government in France and America.

To make a crude distinction, Enlightenment endorses reason as the best human response to the unpredictability of life, Romanticism trusts to impulse and intuition, to acts that are beyond reasonable foresight or rational plans. In this figuration, Romanticism may seem to be a reaction to classical Enlightenment, but even in this distinction, both are connected. For Hume, reason serves no end but that of pleasure, desire, instinctual hope; for Burns, one spark of “nature’s fire” is all the learning he wants or needs, but that spark will suffice in place of learning, reason, rationalism itself. So, both Enlightenment and Romanticism arise in the age of the codification and categorization of knowledge, the age of the first English dictionary and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Yet at the same time they both arise in the age of slavery, in a century where literary culture could not face up squarely to the full meaning of tragedy.

Dr Johnson may have compiled the first English dictionary (1755) but it should be noted that James Boswell set about compiling the first Scots dictionary in the 1760s. In the following century, the major work of John Jamieson (1759-1838), the *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, appeared in two volumes in 1808, and the primary editor of the *Oxford English dictionary* was another Scot, James Murray (1837-1915). The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was first published between 1768 and 1771 in Edinburgh, in three volumes, compiled by yet another Scot, a friend of Robert Burns, William Smellie (1740-95), and founded and published by more Scots: Colin Macfarquhar (c.1745-93), Andrew Bell (1726-1809), Archibald Bell (1774-1827) and others.

If slavery involved Scots at every level, the anti-slavery movement involved Scots at every level too: the situation cannot be easily simplified in moral terms, as it prompts neither comprehensive guilt nor self-glorification, neither abjection nor pious superiorism. The point is that the liability of the dictionaries and encyclopaedias was that in gathering and categorising knowledge, it might seem that they could encompass human experience, securing knowledge as property and endorsing education as privilege. Equally, to many people, the slave trade was financially lucrative, thus eminently sensible, yet it was also humanly appalling, thus to a growing number of people, utterly reprehensible. If anything,

the complex contradictions in lexicography and the arts, international economy and brutality, formed the essential characteristic of the era.

The philosophers and intellectuals of the Scottish Enlightenment lived, usually in comfort, in a context of ideas and conversation, where the articulation of thought was engaged in company as well as in solitude. There were many individuals, in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and elsewhere, whose work contributed to the whole movement. Dugald Stewart arguing for the interconnectedness of all sciences, Thomas Reid developing a theory of connectiveness in a philosophy of “Common Sense” and many others: their literary form was pre-eminently the essay, and any literary reading – supplementing the philosophical, economic, social or scientific aspects of their work – might begin from the point of appreciating their skill as essayists. An excellent selection is available in *The Scottish Enlightenment: An Anthology* (1997), edited by Alexander Broadie, in which contents are arranged by theme: human nature, ethics, aesthetics, religion, economics, social theory and politics, law, historiography, language and science. Broadie’s work on the Enlightenment in various books and studies is invaluable. Here I would like merely to draw attention briefly to a small number of the major figures and suggest some of their most lastingly important innovative thinking.

Pre-eminent is David Hume (1711-76), whose importance derives from the sense he conveys that all sciences are inter-related, connected, reciprocal, and specialisations are always connected back to the ultimate benefit of people: they are there to help people to live. Hugh MacDiarmid called him “Scotland’s Greatest Son”. Adam Smith (1723-90) has been popularly characterised – or caricatured – as the foundational economist who sanctioned laissez-faire capitalism but the truth is more complex. His major work, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), is indeed an exploration of how wealth is generated and how it can be controlled and its benefits regulated, but it hardly offers total sanction to the excesses of late 20th- and early 21st-century Western capitalism. Smith’s distinction was to see how the division of labour could effectively generate wealth and interdependence, the stimulation of intellectual engagement and imagination, and thus help the economy to grow. To abandon the moral foundation would have been abhorrent to him, as would many of his modern advocates, the profiteers and economic tyrants of the banks.

The major work of James Hutton (1726-97) was “*Theory of the Earth; or an Investigation of the Laws observable in the Composition, Dissolution, and Restoration of*

Land upon the Globe”. This was read aloud to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1785 and then published in their Transactions in 1788, after Hutton had been working on it for around twenty-five years. It is the foundational work of modern geology, opening speculative thought on the nature of time and change in the formation of the earth and the idea of geological time (“deep time”). When Burns, in “My Love is like a Red, Red Rose”, pledges that his love will last until all the seas go dry and the rocks melt with the sun, underneath the promise is the notion that the rocks will, indeed, one day melt with the sun, and all the seas go dry. All things change, even the geology of earth itself, in the longest measurements of time. Many of the ideas that underlie Hugh MacDiarmid’s “On a Raised Beach” and Norman MacCaig’s poems in praise of the mountain Suilven and the north-west corner of Scotland known as Assynt, where the stone is so ancient that it carries no fossils, for it predates cellular life, arise from the world Hutton depicted. As much as by David Hume, human understanding of the world was changed forever by James Hutton.

Adam Ferguson (1723-1816), whose seminal work was *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), presented historical progress as twofold: natural, created by God and evident in the earth itself, and social, man-made and progressive. This progressive sense of human evolution was based in sympathy, courtesy and civil behaviour, but it went through distinct “stages” and was therefore known as the “Stadial Theory of Evolution”: human society developed from hunter-gatherer groups, to farming communities, and ultimately to urban civilisations centred in cities. After that, there are the economics of the state, control of capital and government-protected order.

The problem with this theory, of course, is that human societies do not develop at the same rate or in such a simple directional way: hyper-sophisticated cities co-exist contemporaneously with nomadic tribes in different geographies, desert lands. We do not all live in the same time. The most famous example of this in literature is Scott’s novel *Rob Roy*, where the title character is a Highland outlaw but also first cousin to the city-based Bailie Nicol Jarvie. And social regression, as we know too well, is always possible. Some politicians, some forms of media, bring out the worst in people, and the stakes are higher in the 21st century than ever before.

Walter Benjamin, in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), wrote: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free from barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it

was transmitted from one owner to another.” Writing during the Second World War, Benjamin’s understanding of the relation between so-called “barbarism” and so-called “civilization” was certainly as acute as that of the Enlightenment philosophers. Perhaps we should think of them all in two contexts: one of optimistic hope for reason (in the 18th century, King Lear was revised to provide a happy ending; in the 20th, Nazis didn’t bother to rewrite, they simply burned the books); and another, a world in which tragedy was being enacted every day. Their lesson is there for us to learn from still, if we can.

Next week John Purser returns with an essay on the music of the Enlightenment. From John Clerk of Penicuik’s cantata, “The Lion of Scotland Enraged” to numerological universals in composition, composers as much as philosophers were seeking a way to help us get out of the darkness.